

A family thing
by Peter Stone Brown

Sara Lee Guthrie (Rising Son Records)
Shana Morrison, 7 Wishes (Vanguard Records)

Music can be a family thing. Throughout the history of popular music there have been all kinds of family groups, going all the way back and all the way up, from the Monroe Brothers and the Carter Family to the Beach Boys, the Kinks and Oasis. However, for some reason, once someone's children get involved, whether on their own or in a group there seems to be an air of resentment to say the least, from critics in particular. The pinnacle of this resentment was probably Julian Lennon. When Jakob Dylan's band The Wallflowers went on their first national tour, prior to the release of their first album, he avoided all publicity, wouldn't introduce the band members on stage and didn't want anyone to know who he was. On the other hand, country and western musicians had no problem with this and many of them included their kids in their shows. Very few of these kids ever reached anything approaching stardom. Still the pressures of wondering if they're living up to whatever legacy there is, wondering if they're good enough must be enormous.

Sarah Lee Guthrie probably had a lot of help in that department since her dad, Arlo had to go through it as well. Arlo conquered the "son-of" thing by embracing it and managing to ignore it at the same time. He never tried to be the songwriter his father was, had an engaging personality, was extremely funny and delivered concerts that usually turned out to be a moving experience.

When Warner Brothers records finally dropped Arlo Guthrie a couple of decades ago, he pretty much said the hell with the established music business and formed his own label Rising Son. When it came time for his kids (who'd been appearing at his concerts for years) to make their own records, why should they go through the hassle of dealing with either the major labels or the indies?

Sarah Lee Guthrie's eponymous debut has nothing to do with living up to musical expectations, famous fathers or legendary grandfathers. At the same time it does reflect the music she grew obviously grew up with, folk, country, occasionally dabbling in rock and roll, a touch of swingy blues and a rather madcap, derived from ragtime instrumental.

She is not a remarkable singer or an astounding songwriter, but she's not bad either. Both her voice and her songs have a friendly invitational quality. And a more than cursory listen reveals there's a bit more here than initially appears on the surface.

Curiously she opens up with a Hoyt Axton-Mark Dawson song, "In A Young Girl's Mind," (with Arlo playing harp and singing harmony) that gets darker with each verse. Guthrie makes it her own. She follows this with a slow ballad, "Livin' By The Open Door," that turns out to be a tribute to her parents. The next song "All Filled Up," is a short a cappella one-liner, "I'm all filled up like a bucket of rain," to a background of rain and thunder. The vocal fades in, and while I'm usually skeptical of such production touches, this one works. This leads into "Rainbow," one of the album's standouts. Incorporating both a pedal steel and Mariachi flavored horns into the arrangement, she sings, "The rainbow is my favorite color, I could never choose just one" and later "Music is my favorite purpose, I could never choose just one." So if one were to criticize this album for being musically all over the place, Guthrie comes right out and admits it.

"Never In One Place" utilizes another dubious production touch, it sounds like perhaps she's singing long distance, over a phone. But there's a sad, almost spooky melody and an electric guitar solo that totally fits the mood by Guthrie's husband, Johnny Irion.

"Lazy Tongue" another standout, is a casual and catchy swingy affair, that one could imagine Maria Muldaur doing, and "World Turns In G" is a country rocker, that's fun but nothing special.

The album closes with a sing-along, "You've Got To Sing" with a whole chorus of people clapping hands and stomping boots. This song is really where the family legacy is apparent because it sounds like something you would hear at an Arlo concert. And to top it off in a bit of love and theft, the melody is actually Bob Dylan's "Walkin' Down The Line."

While some of the production touches border on silly and the guitars aren't quite as funky as you'd like them to be, Sarah Lee Guthrie isn't out to change the world. She's just out to play some music with her family and her friends. More than anything else that feeling comes across.

Shana Morrison's first album for Vanguard, *7 Wishes* is a much slicker affair. On first listen the production seems cold and the playing is so clean, it sound mechanical. Morrison is going for a contemporary R&B sound and at times the production almost hides the heart in her vocals.

Morrison, daughter of Van, sang with her father's band for a few years, and made her debut on one of his live album, *A Night In San Francisco*.

It's not until the album's fourth track, "A Song For the Broken," that the passion Morrison is clearly capable of comes through. Obviously written for a friend messing his life up she sings this one like she means it, and the

stripped down arrangement in comparison with the rest of the album helps a lot. The less is more approach to "Day After Yes," which is heightened by a funky groove makes it one of the album's more appealing tracks.

One of the problems with the music business for the last few decades is that most singers feel they have to sing their own songs. When Shana sings her father's "Naked In The Jungle" a song released on his album of rarities and songs lost along the way, *The Philosopher's Stone*, the difference in writing is a bit too apparent and this in no way one of Van's greatest songs. And it's not that she can't write a good song as "St. Christopher" shows.

What Shana Morrison can definitely do is sing. She can be tough, nasty when she wants to and definitely funky. There's no doubt what she's singing about on "Cherry On Top," which is if there is any justice should get a lot of airplay. She does a fine job on her father's "Sometimes We Cry," to which he lends back up vocals and harmonica (sound familiar?).

The album ends on a spiritual note with the gospel-tinged "God Must Love Me," followed by the bonus track, "Connection" which is hampered by the unnecessary use of a sitar.

7 Wishes reveals a powerful and determined singer. With more down-to-earth production, and truly top-notch songs, she could be a force to be reckoned with.